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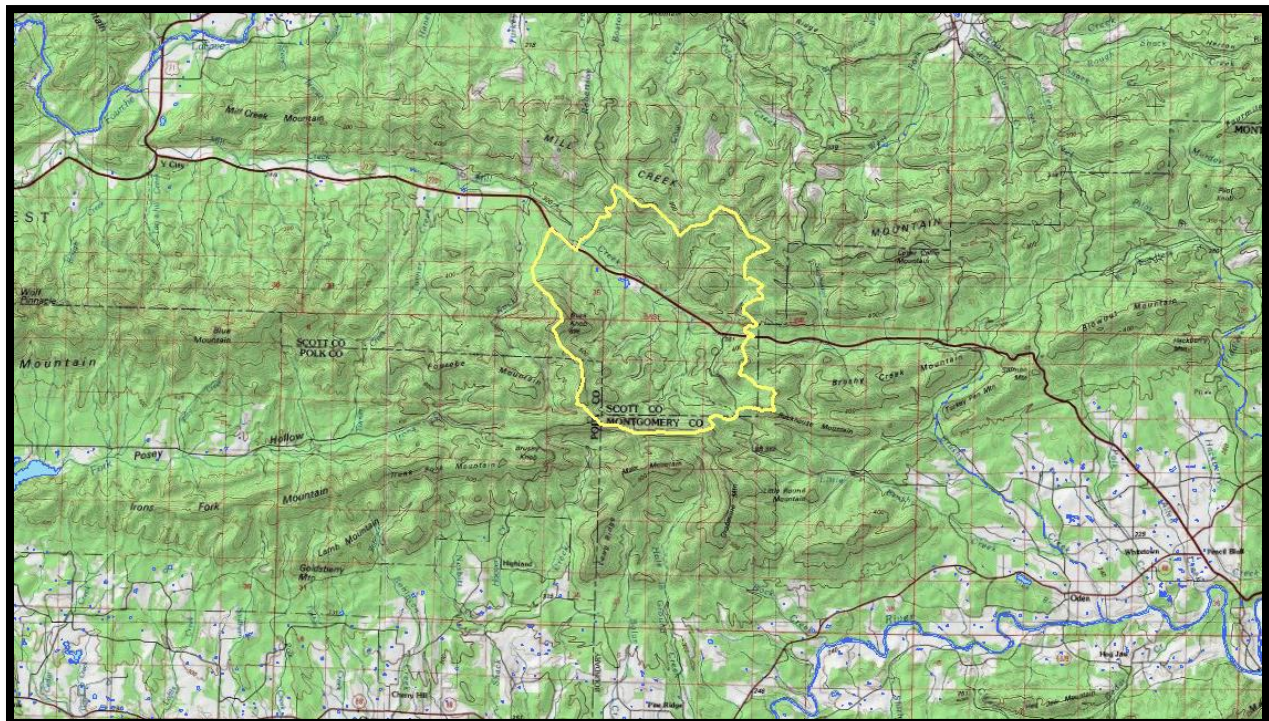
Date: March 27, 2020

Dear Forest Stakeholder:

This project announcement letter serves to initiate scoping, “an early and open process for determining the scope of issues to be addressed” (40 CFR 1501.7). I request your input on the following proposed actions regarding management of the East Mill Creek Project Area.

East Mill Creek is located on the Oden Ranger District. It is within United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service Region 8 (Southern Region) and is part of the Ouachita National Forest (OUF). The East Mill Creek Project Area includes approximately 8,768 acres or about 13.7 square miles; of which 708 acres within the project area is privately owned land.

The analysis area for East Mill Creek is composed of Compartments 1133, 1134, 1135, 1136, 1137, 1138, 1139, and 1140. Geographically, the project area is primarily to the Northeast of Mena and Northwest of Oden, Arkansas, in Township 1N, Range 28W Sections 24, 25, 26, 35, and 36 Township 1S, Range 28W, Sections 1, 12 and 13 T1S, R27W, Sections 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 16, 17, and 18 and, T1N, R27W Sections 19, 20, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, and 33 in Scott, Polk, and Montgomery Counties, Arkansas.





Proposed Action

The Mena-Oden Ranger District proposes to implement management activities identified in Table 1 to meet the needs for East Mill Creek Project Area. The intent of these activities is to move the project area toward desired conditions described in and adopted by the Ouachita National Forest Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Revised Forest Plan) and to partially meet the objectives established by it.

Table 1: Proposed East Mill Creek Watershed Project Area Activities

ACTIVITY	APPROXIMATE TREATMENT AREA (acres unless noted)
Commercial Thinning (acres)	2,961
Plantation Thinning (acres)	414
Pre commercial Thinning (acres)	681
Seed-tree with Reserves/Even-aged Management (acres)	1,818
Clearcut (acres)	31
Site Preparation by Prescribed Fire, Herbicide, Manual, and/or Mechanical Methods (acres)	1,849
Hand Planting with Shortleaf Pine (acres)	1,849
Timber Stand Improvement (Release) by Herbicide and/or Manual Methods (acres)	1,849
Timber Stand Improvement (Precommercial Thinning) by Manual Methods (acres)	1,849
Stocking/TSI Certification Checks (acres)	1,849
Fuel Reduction Prescribed Burning – in Site Prep and Wildlife Stand Improvement Units (acres)	8,060
Wildlife Pond Rehabilitation (ponds)	25
Wildlife Opening Rehabilitation (acres)	6
Wildlife Opening New Construction and maintenance (acres)	12
Wildlife Stand improvement midstory reduction (acres)	965
Temporary Road Construction (miles)	30
Road Maintenance (miles)	14
Trail Maintenance (miles)	2



Fireline construction (miles)	10.3
Fireline reconstruction (miles)	1.8
Open closed road (miles)	0.2
Road stream crossing replacement (crossings)	9
Non-Native, Invasive Species Eradication by Herbicide and/or Manual Methods (acres)	8,060 ¹
Resource Protection Gates (openings and ponds)	As needed
Unauthorized Roads– Close and Decommission	As needed
Install Gates or Berms	As needed
Firewood Areas	As needed
Red Cockaded woodpecker treatments	As needed

1-This figure represents the total area of National Forest System lands that could be subject to non-native, invasive species eradication. The actual area of non-native, invasive species eradication needs are unknown at this time but are estimated to be approximately 1-5% of this figure.

Table 2: Percentage of project area by management area (National Forest System Lands) Need for Action

<i>Management Area</i>	
<i>9</i>	<i>14</i>
4%	96%

The Revised Forest Plan provides primary direction for all management activities and contains the *Vision, Strategy, and Standards* for guiding all natural resource management activities for the Ouachita National Forest. East Mill Creek includes the following Management Areas: Management Area 9 (Water and Riparian), and Management Area 14 (Ouachita Mountains).

This proposed action would implement the following Revised Forest Plan direction.

Desired Conditions for East Mill Creek:

Manage Forest Transportation System

The road system needs management activities in order to protect soil, water, and wildlife resources; reduce road-related barriers to aquatic organism passage; and to provide access to stands within the project area. Needed management activities include construction of temporary roads; installing gates or other barriers on closed roads; obliterating unauthorized, user-created roads; and maintaining existing system roads (Map 3).



Improve Forest Health

Opportunities for the creation of early seral habitat by clearcut and seed-tree with reserves/even-aged management have been identified on 1,849 acres. Stand-establishment activities (including site-preparation and planting) and stand-improvement activities (including release and precommercial thinning) are needed on these acres as well. Additional opportunities for the reduction in stocking by commercial thinning (2,961 acres) and plantation thinning have been identified on (414 acres) (Map 1).

The majority of treatments would be in stands classified as overstocked. Stocking reduction would reduce the potential for insects, diseases, and wildfires; increase timber growth and yield; stimulate rapid development of foraging habitat; improve forest health; and increase herbaceous plant species diversity in an effort to meet Revised Forest Plan desired conditions.

Maintain or Restore Community Diversity and Reduce Fuel Loads of National Forest System Lands

Reduction of existing fuel loading is needed within the project area in order to maintain and/or restore various ecosystem types (e.g., Ouachita Shortleaf Pine-Oak Forest, Ouachita Dry-Mesic Oak Forest, etc.). A prescribed fire program that mimics the natural fire regime is an important management tool for restoring and maintaining most of these communities and providing for patch connectivity among the interspersed communities. Within East Mill Creek, prescribed-burn units have been identified equaling approximately 8,060 acres (Map 2).

Maintain Full Range of Natural Systems Found Within the Ouachita National Forest

Special emphasis to conserve and restore Ouachita Shortleaf Pine-Oak Forest, shale glade, riparian, and other communities through thinning, mid-story reduction, selected herbicide treatment, and/or prescribed fire has been identified as part of the purpose and need for this project area.

Maintain or Enhance Designated Beneficial Uses of Water

Stream crossing restoration would aid in aquatic organism passage. Restoration of stream habitats may occur within the East Mill Creek project area. Rehabilitation of 25 existing wildlife ponds (¼ to ½-acre in size) is also needed within the project area (Map 2).

Maintain or Improve Long Term Soil Productivity

Unauthorized, user-created trails are impacting long-term soil productivity and need stabilization. Unauthorized, dispersed campsites impacting resources may be closed or rehabilitated in an effort to improve long-term soil productivity.

Supply Commodity and Commercial Uses



There is need to provide a sustained yield of high-quality wood products at a level consistent with sound, economic principles. Hardwood, firewood-collection areas may be made available to the public in order to improve utilization of those products.

Supply a Spectrum of Recreational Facilities and Opportunities

Conventional, motorized use is provided for in construction standards and design of facilities. Opportunities for both motorized and non-motorized forms of recreation may also be provided. Hiking, equestrian use, mountain-bike riding, dispersed camping, OHV (mainly 4-wheelers and dirt-bikes) use, hunting, and driving for pleasure are the predominant recreational activities.

Eradication of Non-Native, Invasive Species

Elimination of non-native, invasive species (e.g. tall fescue, sericea lespedeza, autumn olive, honey suckle, privet, etc.) is needed throughout the East Mill Creek project area including but not limited to open areas, timber stands, temporary roads, closed roads, trails, and Forest Service System Roads.

Invitation to Participate in Project Planning

Scoping is not limited to a single point in time. We will continue to accept and consider comments until an implementation decision is made. With that said, your comments will be most helpful if they are received early in the process. They will help us identify environmental issues associated with implementation and alternative ways to meet Revised Forest Plan objectives and desired conditions. Your involvement will enable us to better assess public concerns.

Comments received in response to this solicitation—including names and addresses of those who comment—will become a part of the public record for this proposed action. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered. However, anonymous comments will not provide the Forest Service with the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents.

Objection Process

This project is subject to subparts A and B of 36 *CFR Part 218 Project-Level Predecisional Administrative Review Process* (objection process). It is not authorized under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA).

The designated opportunity for public comment in response to this solicitation is ***March 27, 2020 through April 27, 2020***. Providing specific, written comments during this time will afford you standing to later file an objection to this project should you so desire (see Upcoming Project Planning Steps).

Pursuant to §218.2, specific written comments should be within the scope of the proposed action; have a direct relationship to the proposed action; and must include supporting reasons for the responsible official to consider.



How to Comment

Specific, written comments must be submitted to: Tim Oosterhous, Mena-Oden District Ranger, **1603 Hwy 71 North, Mena, AR, 71953, Fax: 479-394-2389**. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a common, digital format to comments-southern-ouachita-mena-oden@fs.fed.us.

Upcoming Project Planning Steps

As stated above, your comments will help us identify issues, and they will be used to formulate alternatives to this proposal. An environmental analysis will be conducted, and the results will be documented in an environmental assessment (EA).

Upon completion, the draft EA will be released for public review and comment. A 30-day notice and comment period pursuant to 36 CFR 218 will be initiated. This comment period will afford you another opportunity to obtain standing to later file an objection to the project should you desire.

An objection period, if required, will follow the regulation found in §218.7. Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted, specific-written comments regarding this project and attributed to the objector unless the issue is based on new information that arose after a designated opportunity to comment (§218.8(c)).

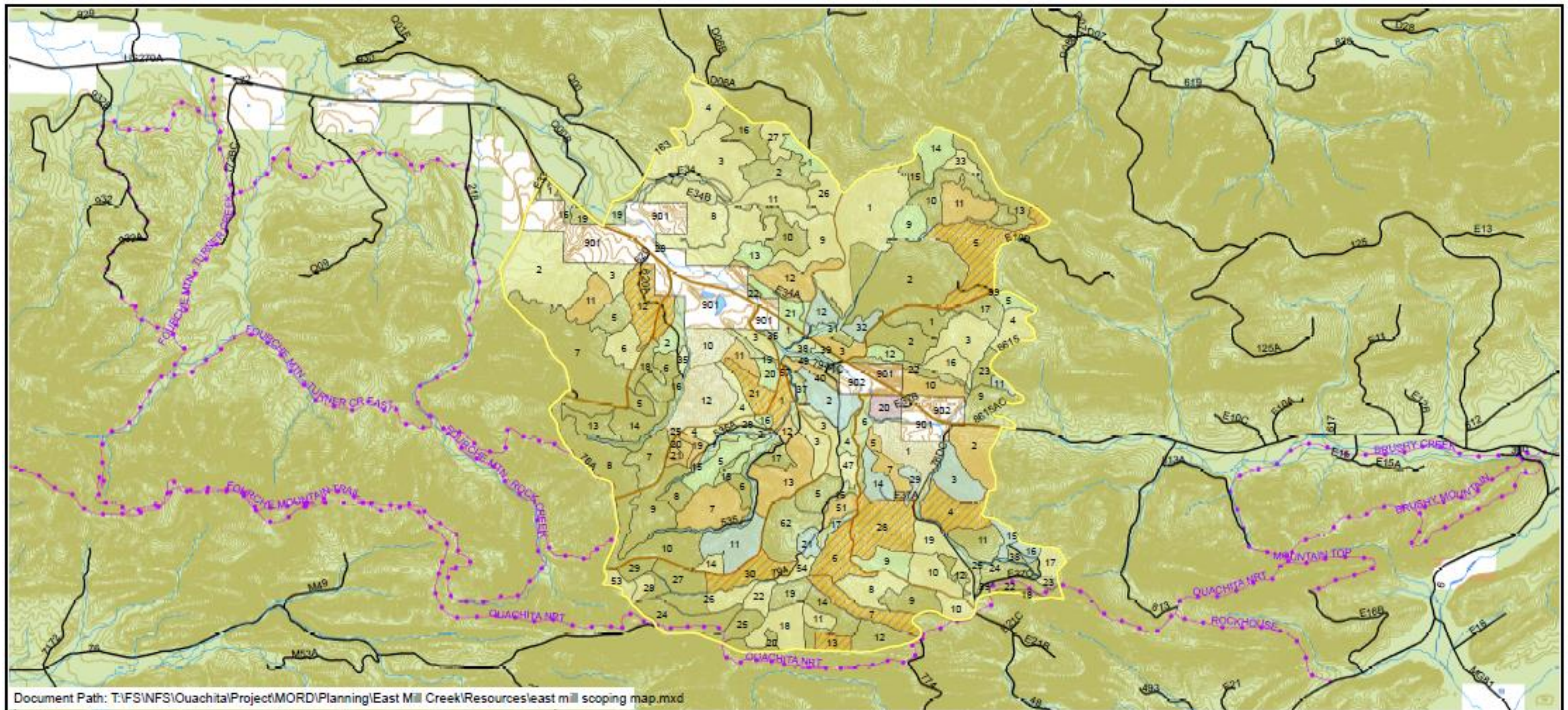
If you have questions about this project or would like more information, please, contact **Jade Ryles** at (479) 394-2382 or cjryles@fs.fed.us.

Sincerely,

/s/ Tim Oosterhous

Tim Oosterhous
District Ranger

See Attachments Map 1-3



Vicinity Map



The Forest Service uses the most current and complete data available. GIS data and product accuracy may vary. They may be developed from sources of differing accuracy, accurate only at certain scales, based on modeling or interpretation, and incomplete while being created or revised, etc. Using GIS products for purposes other than those for which they were created may yield inaccurate or misleading results. This information was released on the date shown below. The Forest Service reserves the right to correct, update, modify, or replace GIS products without notification. Designation of a road, trail or area for motor vehicle use by a particular class of vehicle under 36 CFR 212.51 is not represented on this map. It is the responsibility of the user to acquire the current Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM). The MVUM identifies those roads and trails designated for the motor vehicle use under 36 CFR 212.51 for the purpose of enforcing the prohibition at 36 CFR 261.13.

Legend

Sheet 1 of 1

East Mill Creek

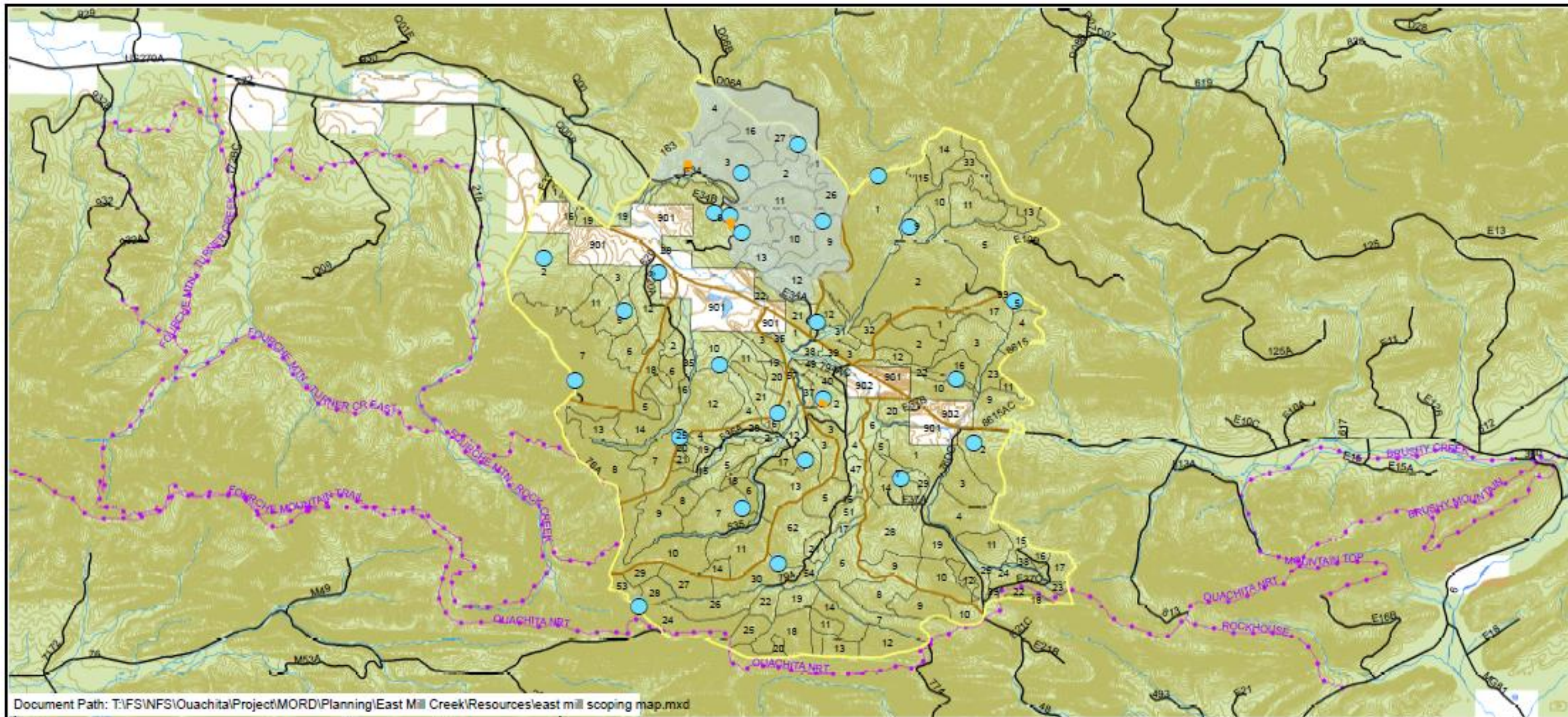
Silviculture Treatments

Oden Ranger District
Scott & Montgomery Counties, Arkansas

U.S. Forest Service - R8
Ouachita National Forest

For more information, contact the Mena Ranger District at 1603 Hwy. 71 North, Mena, AR or phone (479) 394-2382

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Vicinity Map



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0 0.5 1 2 Miles

Legend

- Existing Wildlife Openings
- East Mill Creek Ponds
- Wildlife Stand Improvement
- East Mill Creek Project Boundary
- Compartments
- Stands
- Road
- National Forest Trail
- National Forest System Lands

Sheet 1 of 1

East Mill Creek

Wildlife Treatments

Oden Ranger District
Scott & Montgomery Counties, Arkansas

U.S. Forest Service - R8
Ouachita National Forest

For more information, contact the Mena
Ranger District at 1603 Hwy. 71 North,
Mena, AR or phone (479) 394-2382

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